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ABSTRACT

On March 28, 2003 the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued a report titled "Race-Neutral Alternatives in Postsecondary Education: Innovative Approaches to Diversity." The purpose of this report is to describe a number of race-neutral approaches that postsecondary institutions across the United States are using. This staff assessment by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights examines "Race-Neutral Alternatives" in light of the Commission's prior analyses, findings, and conclusions. ED stated that the "Race-Neutral Alternatives" document consisted of program descriptions, rather than best practices examples, and the report provides no criteria on which the programs are judged. The most the document can do is list programs that might work; it does not in fact provide alternatives. The greatest weakness of the report is that it ignores the growing body of research that challenges assertions that some of the programs are viable substitutes for affirmative action. (Contains 50 endnotes.) (SLD)

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MAKING THE GRADE IN College Prep

A Guide for Improving College Preparation Programs

A publication of The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis
Rossier School of Education
University of Southern California

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A MESSAGE FROM CHEPA'S DIRECTORS

William G. Tierney,
Director

Linda Serra Hagedorn,
Associate Director

Growing population diversity, struggling public schools, and increased competition for admission to selective postsecondary institutions have made college preparation programs an emerging feature of the nation's higher education landscape. The ultimate goal of these programs is to help students, particularly underrepresented students of color, to enroll and succeed in college. While many programs focus on strengthening students' math and reading skills, familiarizing them with college entrance exams, and demystifying the college admissions process, there are few guidelines for how these programs should be structured and which intervention practices are most effective at achieving the desired results. Moreover, the majority of these programs rely on little more than anecdotal evidence to determine whether the students who complete their programs actually go on to earn college degrees.

For the past decade, we at the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) have made understanding the problems associated with college preparation one of the central themes of our research. This experience has led us to conclude that the time has come to articulate a framework that can assist practitioners, funders and policy makers in structuring and evaluating college preparation programs.

With generous funding from the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, CHEPA's college preparation work has focused on five primary issues:

- Devising a system for classifying the range of college preparation programs;
- Analyzing the problems that persist in school-to-college programs;
- Searching for ways to improve program evaluation;
- Investigating ways to improve the process of transfer between community colleges and four-year institutions; and
- Recommending the most successful programmatic interventions.

In pursuing this agenda, CHEPA has supported dialogues among researchers from around the country in order to synthesize disparate research findings. We also have initiated discussions across various audiences—practitioners, policy analysts, researchers, schools, community colleges and universities—in order to create a consensus about how to increase college access for low-income, underrepresented urban youth.

Our assumption is that the need for postsecondary education will only increase in the 21st century. If the United States is to remain a world leader in the global economy, a systemic framework must be developed to enable access for those who have been traditionally denied the benefits of a postsecondary education.

In the following pages, you will read about research-based solutions that offer the scaffolding for such a framework. Whether you are a practitioner, policy maker, fellow researcher or parent, we hope you will find this report useful. We welcome your feedback and encourage you to consult our Web site (www.usc.edu/dept/chepa) for future updates.

William G. Tierney, Director
Linda Serra Hagedorn, Associate Director
Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis

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OVERVIEW

This report draws on several qualitative and quantitative data sources collected as part of a longitudinal study of college preparation programs. We have worked with 17 sites in five cities over the course of seven years. Some of the locations have remained as part of our original sample and others have been studied over the past two years. We sought urban students who fit the standard profiles that federal and state governments use for individuals who have a high probability of not graduating from high school and/or going on to college. In virtually all cases, the characteristics of the students placed them in public schools that have been defined as "economically disadvantaged."

Research Methods

Applying a "case study" approach at the sites, our research methods included interviews, observations and, at times, participation in programmatic activities such as teaching and counseling. We interviewed program directors, project staff, counselors/advisors, students and parents, and we sought three general types of information: (1) their perceptions of the goals, circumstances, and processes used to establish and maintain the program; (2) evidence of program success; and (3) evidence of problems, challenges and the effectiveness of inter-organizational coordination. The underlying assumption of the qualitative portion of the study was that an analysis of the internal life and dynamics of these programs leads to suggestions for program improvement. Such studies have enabled us to offer a robust sense of the characteristics of these programs. In doing so, we have been able to propose changes that are more in line with "real world" problems rather than "black box" models.

We also developed and administered student questionnaires. Our purpose was to collect demographic information and data on issues such as why students enroll in special programs, the attitudes their family and friends have about the program, and students' academic and non-academic behaviors. We also gathered information about student aspirations, obstacles, self-efficacy, identity and more.

In addition, whenever feasible and available we have collected other quantitative data to add to our database. For example, in one of our sites, we were able to obtain a very large dataset containing information collected prior to our survey. Thus, we created a longitudinal design by combining site-specific data with our own.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLEGE PREP PROGRAMS

Characteristics of early intervention programs may include, but are not limited to: academic preparation, test-taking preparation, mentoring and tutoring, academic and career counseling, study skills and life-skills development (e.g. strengthening goal-setting and self-esteem), and clarification of the financial aid process. The majority of such programs focus on youth who are not likely to attend college because they attend economically disadvantaged urban schools.

The target population for college preparation programs – predominantly low-income, urban, minority youth – falls into three categories:

1. **Comprehensively at-risk** students are those who experience poverty, low academic achievement and family instability;
2. **Academically at-risk** students are individuals who have above average test scores but are not on the college track;
3. **Generally at-risk** students attend schools where small percentages of students go to college and a multitude of cultural, familial, and/or social issues derail college aspirations.

Students included in our study reflect these individual characteristics:

- Lowest quartile socio-economic status,
- Child in a single-parent family,
- Older sibling dropped out of high school,
- Changed schools two or more times from 1st to 8th grades,
- Average grades of C's or lower from 6th to 8th grades, and
- Repeated an earlier grade between 1st and 8th grades.

PROGRAM GOALS AND MISSIONS

- Improve and increase access of postsecondary education for academically gifted yet historically underrepresented youth.
- Ensure that underachieving students with academic potential will succeed.
- Assist schools to engage in school-based change.
- Foster partnerships between school districts and four-year colleges to improve learning.
- Reduce number of high-risk students with college potential to finish without high school diplomas.
- Prepare for college admissions and placement tests.

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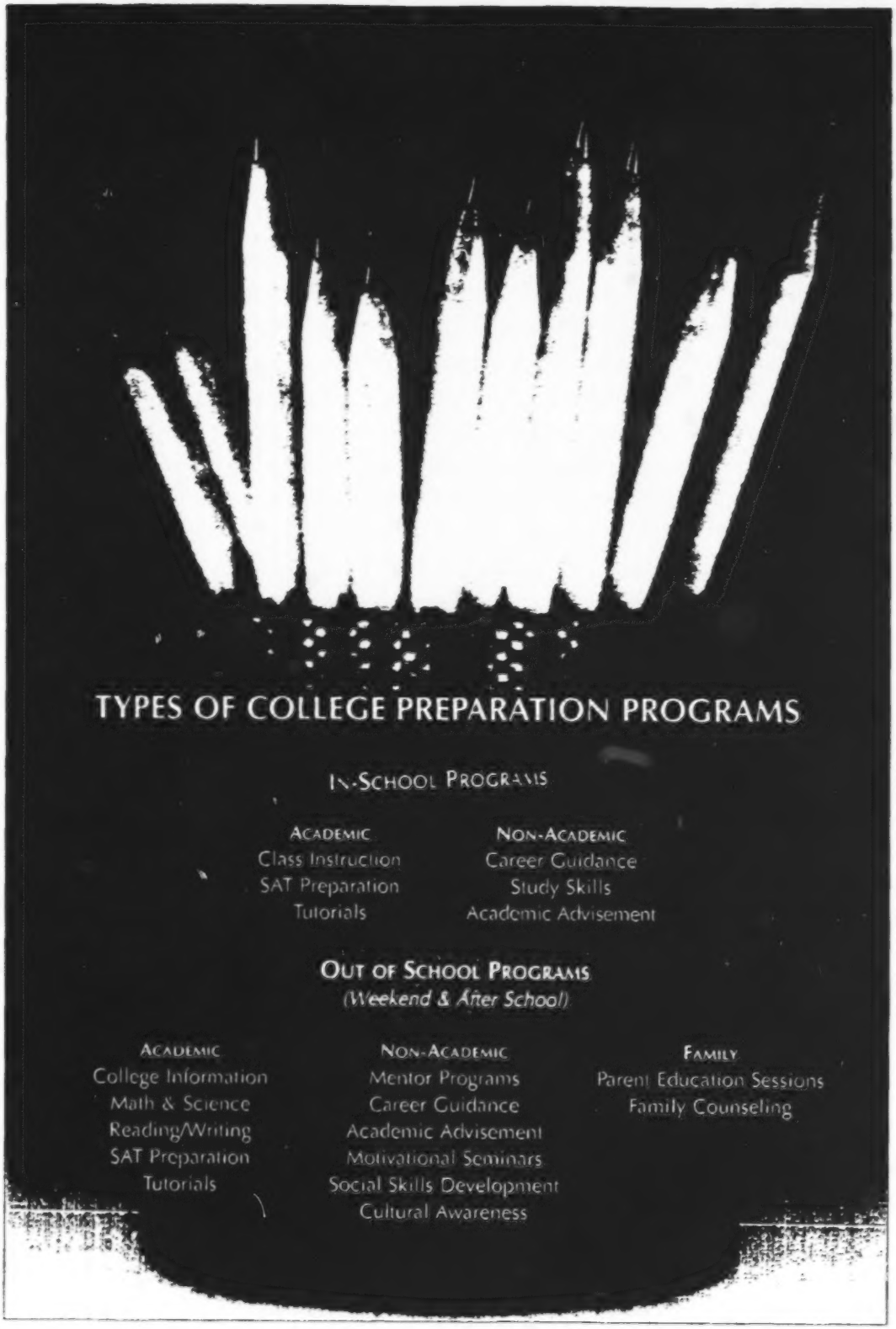

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

In the last decade, CHEPA has used its expertise to delineate the parameters of college prep program improvement. Our aim has been to determine which elements of these programs are more effective than others and why. We have applied multiple analytic techniques and research disciplines to answer such questions as:

- What is the inter-organizational environment in which effective college preparation programs function?
- What are the characteristics and resources of prep programs that enable students to succeed?
- How can organizations work together for the benefit of students?
- How can programs deal effectively with this specific cadre of students?
- What is the role of family involvement in enabling students to enroll in a college or university?
- What are the critical variables for enabling student success in colleges and universities?
- How important is having knowledgeable counselors available to advise students?
- Are a student's peer groups a helpful component for enabling the student to get into a college or university?
- Is it important for college preparation programs to emphasize the culture of the student in order to assist him/her to get into a college or university?
- What is the effect of offering college level courses to low-income students while they are still in high school?

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WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

While our research efforts on this topic will continue over the next several years, already several common program challenges have been identified:

Many programs are geared toward short-term solutions. A substantial number of programs do not begin until the 11th grade, and they often occur over the summer months.

Few programs have coordinated relationships with the schools that the students attend and the postsecondary institutions where students will attend. College preparation programs tend to work in isolation from schools, colleges and universities. Even when they are located at a school or postsecondary institution they are not always integrated into the institution.

Families are often ill equipped to provide advice to their children. The populations we have studied are overwhelmingly first generation college-goers. Their relatives usually do not have information about what one needs to apply, to be admitted, or to attend college.

Most programs survive on soft money. The pattern for most programs is that they live from grant to grant. Because they need to adapt to the interests of potential funders, a program's components may change from funding opportunity to funding opportunity.

Program evaluation is absent. Because of the lack of funding, most programs have not invested in significant and sustained evaluations. Programs frequently make claims of 80 to 90 percent success rates, but these claims are difficult to substantiate. There are virtually no data that consider the successes of graduates of college preparation programs after they are in college.

Student attrition from the day they graduate from high school until the end of their first term at college remains a significant problem. As high school graduates wait for the first day of college, there is seldom assistance offered to help them prepare for the transition. Once the academic year begins, there is often no support structure in place specifically for graduates of college preparation programs.

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Most graduates of college preparation programs attend two-year community colleges or public state universities. The relationships between most college preparation programs and community colleges are complex and contradictory. On the one hand, most programs consider enrollment at community colleges to be a lesser success than enrollment at a four-year university. On the other hand, for the programs we studied, the majority of students begin their studies at the community college. Despite program goals of attendance at major universities, students in college preparation programs generally do not attend private and/or elite institutions. Further, it appears that transfer rates between the community college and a four-year institution remain no better than the national average. When students do transfer, they usually go on to state universities.

Academic, counseling and social activities are the primary components of college preparation programs. Activities vary from program to program and there is no overriding assumption about which activity best prepares students for college. Some programs emphasize math and language skills, while others concentrate on either college counseling or socio-emotional support. Still other programs take students on college trips or provide social activities aimed at keeping students busy after school or during the summer.

Cost-effectiveness analyses do not exist. Programs do not have a sense of which activities are more cost effective than others.

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NINE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

We have identified nine intervention strategies that practitioners, researchers and policy analysts might consider for improving program performance:

1. **Create an integrated organizational structure.** Programs have a better chance at retaining students and enabling them to get into college when they have systematic working relationships with schools, colleges and universities.
2. **Incorporate families into the learning environment.** Families make a difference in student learning. Involve at least one individual from the youth's family in a sustained manner. Consider the family as a vital resource to be utilized rather than a weak link to be ignored.
3. **Develop sustained learning activities that begin early and occur frequently.** Although summer bridge programs certainly help some youth in some activities, most of the students we studied benefit from programs that begin early and occur over a sustained period.
4. **School and community college districts, states, and the federal government need to develop a coordinated funding structure that enables practitioners to concentrate on program improvement.** Although one may welcome the support of private donors and foundations, those same groups change their priorities. If college preparation programs are essential, they need to be placed on firm footing. Public funding is the best way to establish that stability.
5. **Implement rigorous program evaluations.** Programs need to have a sense of what works and what does not work if they are to perform at their highest potential.
6. **Develop a coordinated system that keeps track of the student from the senior year in high school through the end of the first term in college.** The firewall between schools and postsecondary institutions needs to be broken down so that a systemic relationship exists that provides coordination and communication to serve the best interests of the students in college preparation programs.
7. **Provide and prepare students for the full range of postsecondary options.** We fully support and respect two year institutions and public state institutions. We also believe, however, that the population we have studied ought to have at their disposal a full range of options. To ensure that such options exist, greater communication needs to occur between the elite institutions and college preparation programs.
8. **Focus on academic and counseling activities.** Although a multitude of activities might benefit many youth, the greatest predictors of retention in high school and access to college are a focus on academic skills and a supportive counseling environment.
9. **Undertake studies of cost effectiveness.** The single most important area of research to be done in the coming years is an analysis of the related costs of these programs to their benefits.

MODEL OF COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Program Characteristics

- Primary Role & Mission
- Local Service Delivery System (i.e., College/High School Collaboration)
- Target Population (i.e., Low-Income, Females, Minority)
- Organizational Infrastructure (i.e., Staffing, Leadership, Resources)
- Primary Funding Sources (Federal, State, Private)
- Types of Programs (i.e., Dropout Prevention, Early Identification)
- Program Size & Location (Urban, Rural, Suburban)

Instructional Components

Academic Services

Preparatory Courses
SAT/ACT Prep
College Level Courses
Accelerated Courses
Remedial Courses

Supplemental Courses
Math & Science
Reading & Writing
Critical Thinking Skills

Non-Academic Services

Field Trips
College Fairs
Cultural Activities
Social Skills Development
Motivational Seminars
Vocational Guidance
Career Days on Campus

Modes of Delivery

-In-School Activities
-After-School or Weekend Workshops
-Summer Bridge Programs

- Classroom Instruction
- Tutoring
- Mentoring
- Workshops / Small Groups
- Assessment & Testing

Desired Outcomes

Short-term:
-Student Persistence
-Higher GPA
-Improved Study Skills
-College Attendance
-Dropout Prevention

Long-term:
-College Completion
-Socio-Emotional Development
-Academic Preparation
-Self-Regulated Learning

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NEXT STEPS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

Based on our research and the suggestions for improvement, we recommend pursuit of the following initial steps:

For College Preparation Program Practitioners

Undertake an analysis of discrete program components. The first step toward program improvement is to critique the various program components.

Develop benchmarking criteria. When a program is able to evaluate itself against comparable data points then it will have a sense of its effectiveness.

Provide staff training. An effective route to program improvement is to ensure that the staff is adequately trained and provided with the skills necessary to carry out their jobs.

Maintain detailed records. Preparation programs must maintain a database of students served, the services provided, and program entry and exit dates. Appropriate records will allow evaluation to be reliable and accurate. Moreover, good record-keeping practices will better enable programs to track students after graduation from the college preparation program.

For Schools and Universities

Create a liaison committee for college preparation. Systematic and more frequent communication between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions will benefit students in their preparation for and transition to college.

Develop a structured sequence of activities from high school graduation through the fall term. The responsibility of the summer term needs to be shared between high schools and postsecondary institutions. Rather than a weak or non-existent link, the summer inter-session ought to be seen as the vital first step en route to a successful college career.

For State and Federal Governments

Develop a statewide strategy. If there needs to be coordination, then the state ought to convene a working committee of college preparation program directors, high school principals and university administrators to develop and implement a strategic plan.

Provide hard funding. These programs will always be seen as stopgap measures until long-term funding is available.

Collect comprehensive data. The lack of data about which program components are more effective than others makes program improvements difficult. A systematic plan enables individual programs to improve and will increase the ability of programs to borrow successful strategies from one another.

For Foundations and Donors

Fund what works rather than what feels good. Foundations and donors have a tendency to fund programs that may have heart-wrenching anecdotes but little confirmable evidence of success.

Expect and fund program evaluations. The most important contribution a direct service foundation can make is the expectation that programs will be evaluated. Funders must then also provide the resources necessary to conduct those evaluations.

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CONCLUSION

We have consistently been impressed with the dedication and hard work of virtually all of the individuals with whom we have been involved. And yet, we are concerned that a great deal of energy, enthusiasm and resources are being expended in ineffective ways. What we have outlined here ought not be viewed as the final comment on program improvement. Instead, they are our suggestions about how to enhance college preparation programs and increase program effectiveness.

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Web sites:
www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp
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www.collegeboard.com

ABOUT CHEPA

The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis is an interdisciplinary research center based at the University of Southern California. We also draw on the expertise of external experts as needed on a project-by-project basis. Our mission is to improve urban higher education, strengthen school-university relationships, and to focus on international higher education, emphasizing Latin America and the Pacific Rim. Our projects focus exclusively on policy-oriented studies pertaining to the improvement of postsecondary education.

In addition to the work that has been outlined here, we are currently involved in a multi-year investigation of governance and decision-making in higher education, a study pertaining to ways to increase the diversity of the faculty, and a research-based project that will provide ways to increase the transfer rates of urban community college students to four-year institutions. In June 2001, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne in order to enhance our capability in conducting comparative higher education research. Over the last decade, we have received funding from, among others, the Ford Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, Atlantic Philanthropies, the James Irvine Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Trust, and the Haynes Foundation.

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Research assistance was provided by CHEPA graduate students Zoë Corwin and Julia Colyar.

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